VISIT…

DESERT SANDS

A short adventure for four 13th-level player characters

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Based on the original DUNGEONS & DRAGONS® game by E. Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson and on the new edition of the DUNGEONS & DRAGONS game designed by Jonathan Tweet, Monte Cook, Skip Williams, Rich Baker, and Peter Adkison.

d20 system

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INTRODUCTION

Some quest for glory and adventure. Some seek power. Different goals motivate different heroes and villains. As for Vythenus the efreeti, he seeks gold. But his quest is not his own….

Vythenus had the ill fortune to be summoned by a red dragon, who bound him to acquire 500,000 gp worth of treasure for her. To say the genie resented this mandate is to say the Elemental Plane of Fire is "a bit warm." Obliged to serve, Vythenus takes his time gathering the wealth; he conscripted some fire giants and set up a lackluster operation in the desert, raiding and destroying caravans. And slowly, the efreeti plots his revenge

PREPARATION

As the Dungeon Master® (DM), you need a copy of the *Player's Handbook*, the *DUNGEON MASTER'S Guide,* and the *MONSTER MANUAL®* to use this adventure. Monster statistics are provided with each encounter in abbreviated form; notations for each monster reference the appropriate page of the *MONSTER MANUAL* for full details. Throughout this adventure, text that appears in shaded boxes is player information, which you may read aloud or paraphrase when appropriate.

This scenario can take place in any desert area that lies in the middle of a trade route between two cities. Special opportunities exist for player characters (PCs) who take the ranger and druid classes; for the latest new skills, spells, and equipment available to those classes, see the new guidebook *Masters of the Wild.*

INVOLVING THE PCS

Over the past few weeks, most of the trading caravans that left the small city of Hesron to travel through the desert to the large city of Gryth never arrived. No one knows who or what impeded the shipments.

As you know your player characters best, you can gauge how to involve them most effectively. Here are a few ideas:

- A general posting of the merchants' guild's reward of 8,000 gp for the return of the lost merchandise provides a straightforward introduction to the adventure.
- The mayor of Hesron or Gryth may contact player characters with competent reputations and ask for help.
- The PCs might have known the sorcerer or cleric who guarded the largest caravan.
- An arcane guild may hire the PCs for help finding a sorcerer who went missing with a caravan.

- A church may ask cleric player characters to seek the body of their fallen brother or sister.

INVESTIGATING

The PCs can start in either city. The following list provides general information they can glean from directly questioning city officials, the merchants' guild, or through general Gather Information efforts. Most of these facts are beneath the notice of bards or loremasters, though these characters would have a chance to know about the obelisk and the artist mentioned below.

DC 10: Crossing the desert between the cities normally takes 18 days for a caravan with wagons, but only one week for camels. It is 140 miles between Hesron and Gryth.

DC 10: Caravans occasionally disappear due to fierce sandstorms that rage across the desert.

DC 10: The weather for the past few weeks has been clear in town but, from the red shadow on the horizon yesterday, locals know a dust storm scoured the desert.

DC 10: Five caravans have disappeared over the last three months. They were owned by different merchants and carried a variety of trade goods, including spices, silk, and dyes.

DC 10: Currently, the merchants' guild is offering a reward of 8,000 gp for the return of the merchandise.

DC 15: Finding and permanently eliminating the threat is worth an addition 8,000 gp.

DC 15: Attempts to find the caravan guards or any attackers via *scrying* proved unsuccessful.

DC 15: Lacking bodies, the spells *raise dead, speak with dead*, and *resurrection* cannot be cast on the caravan guards. No one in either town has reached sufficient level to cast *true resurrection*.

DC 20: The largest caravan employed 10 general guards (War5) to protect it, along with a magic user (Sor7) and a cleric (Clr10).

DC 20: At the midpoint of the journey stands a large basalt obelisk with a distinctive shape.

DC 25: The total value of all the lost goods was 50,000 gp. The reward mentioned above is a very generous finder's fee.

DC 25: A local artist has painted some pictures of the obelisk that would enable an arcane caster to *teleport* or *teleport without error* there as if seen casually. A large cactus grows in the foreground (useful for druids with transport via plants).

DC 25: The cleric in the largest caravan had cast a *sending* each evening to relatives in each city. The journey had gone well, without incident, for the first three days. No message was received on the fourth day.

DC 30: The extremely old obelisk bears some very worn markings that no one has deciphered.

IN THE DESERT

Travel through the desert by foot or mount is slow. See Table 9-5: Terrain and Overland Movement and Table 9-6: Mounts and Vehicles in Chapter 9 of the *Player's Handbook*.

The desert is hot, with temperatures above 90°F. See Heat Dangers in Chapter 3 of the *Dungeon Master's Guide*. Be sure to present this challenging aspect of the environment to the player characters. They should be able to deal with the problem easily, but it will drain some of their resources while providing atmosphere.

The desert isn't barren. Numerous cacti of different types grow around here, and some animals make their homes in the area. Druids and rangers can benefit from speaking with the flora and fauna. They also can use *tree stride* to pass between cacti (treat as "all other trees" for distance). *Transport via plants* allows a druid to cover great distances between cacti.

Dust Storm (EL 12)

As if the heat weren't bad enough, a dust storm comes up after a day in the desert. Weather hazards form a real threat to the unprepared, but by 13th level the characters should have numerous ways of avoiding environmental dangers. *Control winds* would help, and *control weather* should easily ensure a pleasant journey. Nevertheless, if they've neglected to take precautions, PCs may find themselves hampered by the greater dust storm that kicks up. See Weather Hazards in Chapter 3 of the *Dungeon Master's Guide*.

At the heart of the storm is an elder air elemental. The 100-foot area around the elemental increases the severity of what would have been a normal dust storm to that of a greater dust storm, as described in the *Dungeon Master's Guide*.

Elder Air Elemental: hp 204 (MM 81)

DOMAIN OF THE DESERT LORD

Seventy miles into the desert, at the midpoint of the journey, the characters find an enormous basalt obelisk. A large cactus grows close to the shelter it provides.

A large black obelisk juts up from the sand. Several big cacti dot the landscape around it.

The Area

The dust storm that howled through the area the day before the PCs arrived in the city obliterated all tracks. A Search or Wilderness Lore (with Track) check (DC 20) uncovers a few spent arrows mostly buried in the sand. Even with the dust storms, it looks as if the area has been carefully cleaned up after a fight.

The Obelisk

Wind and time have eroded the sharply hewn edges of the 20-foot-tall monolith. One side is pocked with faint markings.

The PCs can see slight etchings in the basalt. It was an inscription. To find all that remain of it requires a Search check (DC 20). A Decipher Script check (DC 30) reveals that the following inscription in Common had been carved into the rock.

> "Dedicated to the Lord of the Desert in Thanks for Your Help When I Called for Your Aid."

A bardic knowledge check (DC 30) allows a PC to recall an old legend about a desert treant that actively protected the animals and wildlife in these parts.

Flora and Fauna

Smart characters won't dismiss witnesses that aren't humanoid.

- If the PCs ask any of the local wildlife about the Lord of the Desert, it will happily praise the merits of Longspine, a powerful cactus treant that protects the desert life.
- The cactus by the obelisk saw all the attacks on the missing caravans. Four very large people with coal-black skin (fire giants) attacked the last few caravans right here.
- Local birds of prey know that there's a cave system a mile to the north with many bones (including some fresh) piled outside.

Longspine, Lord of the Desert (EL 9)

Longspine has ruled over this desert for the last millennium. He dearly cares for its animals and plants. In his youth he extended his interest to the humanoids that crossed the desert, seeking to protect them also. One such grateful human erected the obelisk long ago.

Years passed.

Several unpleasant encounters with rude humanoids made Longspine rethink his patronage. He withdrew his protection and stopped interacting with two-legged beings. Now, only the desert animals and plants matter to him. He's aware of the attacks on the caravans, but it means as little to him as the passing breeze.

He does occasionally come to the obelisk, remembering his past friends with fondness. If the PCs call out loudly to the "Lord of the Desert" (a term he has not heard for several hundred years) or seek to contact him through the local animals, Longspine may answer. His initial attitude (see NPC Attitudes in Chapter 5 of the *Dungeon Master's Guide*) is indifferent. He neither approves nor disapproves of the attacks on the caravans—he feels it's none of his concern. If the PCs change his attitude to friendly, he shares what he knows. Should the group alter his attitude to helpful, Longspine renders what aid he can.

- The treant knows much about the area:
- Four fire giants lair in a large cave a mile to the north.
- Someone else who seems to be directing them also lairs there.
- All the caravan members were killed and eaten, their bones piled outside the cave.
- The merchandise from the caravans is stored in the cave.

Longspine, cactus treant: hp 66; 800 gp, 2 agates, 1 rock crystal; otherwise as treant (MM 178) except as follows:

Animate Trees becomes **Animate Cacti**, but otherwise remains unchanged.

Add to SA: **Thorns (Ex):** A cactus treant's spiny body deals 1d6 points of additional piercing damage whenever it hits in melee or, when grappling, each round it maintains a hold.

Remove from SQ: **Fire Vulnerability.** Since a cactus stores water and is not made of wood, it does has no special vulnerability to fire.

These changes increase the creature's CR by 1.

The Raiders (EL 14)

Based in a cave system one mile away, four fire giants conscripted by Vythenus keep a desultory watch over the trade route. They check the obelisk (a customary rest stop or camping site) a couple times a day. For each hour the PCs spend at the obelisk, there's a cumulative 15% chance that the fire giants attack. Otherwise, the party encounters them at the cave.

Fire Giants (4): hp 127, 131, 143, 156 (MM 98)

Possessions: Each of the fire giants carries two *potions of cure serious wounds* and one *potion of heroism*. All the caravan treasure is back at the cave (see below).

Tactics

The fire giants have grown accustomed to weak foes that provide little resistance. As they close, they throw some rocks at the PCs, then come in swinging their huge greatswords. If the characters provide a good fight, the fire giants try drinking their *potions of heroism* and consume the *potions of cure serious wounds* as needed. If they lose half their hit points or gang members, they retreat to the cave.

THE CAVE AND THE UNWILLING EFREETI (EL 14)

The cave, a mile north of the obelisk, is fairly ordinary. It has three large rooms, each with a 20-foot ceiling height. The fire giants occupy the chamber nearest the entrance, which measures 30 feet by 40 feet. Vythenus, an efreeti, lives in the middle one, which is 30 feet square. The one farthest back, with dimensions of 20 feet by 30 feet, holds the trade goods. A large pile of bones is stacked to one side of the cave entrance, silent testimony to the fate of the caravan guards. Just inside the cave entrance lies the creatures' large fire pit, where they sit to take the edge off the unpleasant chill of the desert nights.

The "mastermind" of this raiding operation is Vythenus. Six months ago the efreeti found himself summoned by a red dragon named Bravura. For many years the dragon, hungry for wealth, has used *planar binding* spells to make other powerful beings increase her hoard for her (seeking loot herself is beneath her dignity). Now Vythenus must accumulate prodigious amounts of treasure for his mistress before he can hope for release. In fact, he has very little hope of release—Bravura has made it clear that once the task was done, she would summon him again. So the resentful genie goes about his task with great resentment and little enthusiasm.

Vythenus keeps himself cloaked with his *nondetection* spell and spends almost all his time invisible, which explains why attempts to scry him proved unsuccessful. He keeps in contact with the fire giants via *telepathy*. Although they work for him, he does not like the giants and considers them expendable resources. He doesn't bother coming to their aid, but he will defend the cave if the giants retreat to it or when the PCs come to fight or investigate.

If the player characters attack the cave, Vythenus puts up only a token resistance to protect the stash of goods he acquired for Bravura before plane shifting away. A perceptive player character may make a Sense Motive check (DC 20) to notice that the efreeti has little interest in the goods and is merely "going through the motions" of trying to defend it. As he assumes he is fated to collect treasure for the dragon for many years to come, losing a bit of it now makes very little difference.

If the player characters choose to negotiate, Vythenus endeavors to use his Sense Motive skill to ascertain the party's honesty. If they seem sincere, he may agree to join them in a plan of revenge against the dragon. He may even promise them a *wish* or two, given after Bravura dies.

Vythenus, male efreeti Sor6: CR 14; Large outsider (Fire, Lawful, Evil); HD 10d8+20 plus 6d4+12; hp 92; Init +7; Spd 20 ft., fly 40 ft. (perfect); AC 22 (touch 14, flat-footed 19); Atk +18/+13/+8 melee (1d8+9, slam); Face/Reach 5 ft. x 5 ft./10 ft.; SA Heat, spell-like abilities; SQ Fire subtype, outsider traits, plane shift, telepathy; AL LE; SV Fort +13, Ref +16, Will +18; Str 23, Dex 17, Con 14, Int 12, Wis 15, Cha 16.

Skills and Feats: Bluff +13, Concentration +15, Diplomacy +7, Escape Artist +13, Hide –1, Intimidate +12, Knowledge (arcana) +7, Listen +12, Move Silently +13, Scry +7, Sense Motive +12, Spellcraft +17, Spot +12; Combat Casting, Combat Reflexes, Dodge, Improved Initiative, Iron Will, Lightning Reflexes.

Heat (Ex): Vythenus's red-hot body deals 1d6 points of additional fire damage whenever he hits in melee or, when grappling, each round he maintains a hold.

Spell-Like Abilities (Sp): At will—*produce flame* and *pyrotechnics*; 1/day—grant up to three *wishes* (to nongenies only), *detect magic*, *enlarge*, *gaseous form*, *invisibility*, *permanent image*, *polymorph self*, and *wall of fire*. These abilities are as the spells cast by an 18th-level sorcerer (save DC 13 + spell level).

Fire Subtype: Immune to fire damage; suffers double damage from cold unless a saving throw for half damage is allowed, in which case he takes half damage on a success and double damage on a failure.

Outsider Traits: Darkvision 60 feet; cannot be raised or resurrected (though a *wish* or *miracle* spell can restore life).

***Plane Shift* (Sp):** Vythenus can enter any of the elemental planes, the Astral Plane, or the Material Plane. This ability transports the genie and up to six

other creatures, provided they all link hands with him. It is otherwise similar to the spell of the same name.

Telepathy (Su): Vythenus can communicate telepathically with any creature within 100 feet that has a language.

Sorcerer Spells Known: (6/7/6/4; base DC = 13 + spell level): 0—*arcane mark*, *flare*, *ghost sound*, *light*, *mage hand*, *read magic*, *resistance*; 1st—*charm person*, *comprehend languages*, *detect secret doors*, *identify*; 2nd—*mirror image*, *see invisibility*; 3rd—*nondetection*.

Possessions Bracers of armor +2, *cloak of resistance +2*, *ring of protection +2*, 10 pearls worth 100 gp each. The caverns also hold the 50,000 gp worth of stolen goods (for which the party could claim an 8,000 gp reward).

The stolen property obviously comes from different sources, with various merchants' insignias branded on the boxes and barrels. Most of the supplies are spices, dyes, and silk, all easily sold in any large city. Getting the merchandise out of the cave back to civilization will be difficult. All the wagons from the caravans went toward firewood for the giants and efreeti. The goods fill an area 20 feet square and 20 feet high (8,000 cubic feet, weighing 10,000 lb). If the PCs choose to sell the goods, buyers in the cities of Hesron and Gryth will easily identify it all as stolen merchandise; the party could fence the goods for half value: 25,000 gp. Taking the merchandise to cities farther away would probably allow the party to get full price for it.

FURTHER ADVENTURE

The player characters may find out about Bravura's role in the caravan attacks. Vythenus would appreciate their help in getting revenge on the very old red dragon—he's still bound to her and must collect valuables for her. At the moment, she's probably too tough (CR 20) for them to consider fighting directly, but Vyntheus knows of a few more of her money-making schemes that the PCs may enjoy terminating…

If the party returns the goods to the merchants' guild, the caravan owners will be both grateful and impressed. The group may have just made friends with a powerful mercantile organization.

Bringing back the remains of the dead will gain the characters allies once the sorcerer and cleric are resurrected.

Should the PCs keep the stolen goods or sell them, the merchants from Hesron and Gryth eventually find out what happened. The party may have just made enemies of a powerful mercantile organization.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gwendolyn F.M. Kestrel is an editor for Wizards of the Coast's Roleplaying Games R&D department. Recent credits include editing *Faiths and Pantheons*, *Oriental Adventures*, *Magic of Faerûn*, and *Defenders of the Faith*. Addicted to education, she's currently enrolled in a Ph.D. program in cognitive studies with the University of Washington's Department of Education. Check out the website she created for her fiancé, game designer Andy Collins, at <www.andycollins.net>.